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Review of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature: Thirtieth-Anniversary Edition* by Richard Rorty, with an introduction by Michael Williams and an afterword by David Bromwich, Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009, pp. 439 + xxxiii
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Richard Rorty's *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was received as a major work as soon as it was published in 1979; Richard Bernstein rushed a full-length review article into print before the year was out, it was the subject of an APA book symposium the following year, and the book's early reputation was sealed by Quentin Skinner's high-profile and rather racy review in the *New York Review of Books*, which left the reader in no doubt about its 'exceptional originality and importance'. Princeton's new thirtieth-anniversary edition is the latest stage in the book's apparently inexorable ascent to canonical status. During those thirty years, it has aged extremely well, and its two central themes, metaphilosophy and social coherentism, remain just as relevant as ever. More so, in fact, since there has been a recent resurgence of interest in metaphilosophy, albeit pursuing constructive directions Rorty would disapprove of, with books such as Timothy Williamson's *Philosophy of Philosophy*, and the David Chalmers *et al.* collection *Metametaphysics*, as well as through the medium of the new experimental philosophy movement. Rorty's social coherentism, on the other hand, with its affiliations to both post-Existentialist French philosophy and Donald Davidson's philosophy of language, never ceased to be at the centre of a wide range of debates. Within analytic philosophy at least, this has been largely due to high-profile critiques, such as John McDowell's response on behalf of empiricism in *Mind and World*, and Paul Boghossian's invective against social relativism and constructivism, *Fear of Knowledge*, in which Rorty is cast as the anti-hero, but Rorty's ideas have also exerted a positive influence on constructive programmes currently being pursued by the likes of Robert Brandom and Huw Price. Moreover, apart from these two central themes of the book, there is much else of contemporary interest here, from Rorty's attempt to historically deconstruct the mind-body problem, and in particular the problem of consciousness, to his critiques of causal theories of reference and the philosophy of psychology. In short, the relevance of this book has not even begun to diminish; philosophy, along with all the other academic disciplines it influenced, has been catching up.

So what does this new edition add? Well, the short answer is that it adds a new introduction by Michael Williams, a previously unpublished early essay by Rorty, and a short personal recollection by David Bromwich to mark Rorty's recent death. It also has a new cover, the design of which cleverly hints at Princeton's previous edition, but with the addition, unwelcome in my opinion, of a rather too close-up photograph of an elderly Rorty who has somehow been persuaded to adopt a 'thinker' pose. Most of the additional material included in this edition is very good, and Rorty enthusiasts will want to read it all, but the problem, however, is that with the exception of Williams' introduction, it is not obvious what it is doing here. I shall return to this issue below. But even if the inclusions did make sense, which I do not think they do, it would still be hard to sympathise with the way they have been wrapped together with the original, as if they were part of an organic whole. Williams' introduction has been inserted after Rorty's dedication and quotations from Wittgenstein, and before

the original preface, which is not so bad, although it would have been better to place it before the entire manuscript Rorty prepared. What is really bad, however, is that the essay by young Rorty, fascinating though it is, has been placed directly after the powerful conclusion of the mature philosopher's magnum opus, without even a page break, as if it were simply the next chapter. This is followed by Bromich's 'afterword', which could just as easily have been a foreword, and then the original index, which of course refers only to the text of Rorty's original book. It would have made much more sense to place all of the added extras before the beginning of *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

The choice of Williams to write the new introduction could not have been bettered, since he was one of two original readers of the manuscript, along with Richard Bernstein, and has since proved himself perhaps the most astute of all commentators on Rorty. His introduction gets straight to the heart of the difficulty with Rorty's project of setting aside the traditional problems of philosophy, which is that arguments will be needed to persuade us to do this, and these arguments 'must not themselves imply epistemological or metaphysical commitments of the sort we are trying to escape'; as Williams notes, '[t]his is a tall order' (xiv). Rorty's solution was 'epistemological behaviourism', which is the social coherentist position that questions about knowledge are determined exclusively by linguistic behaviour within society, by contrast with traditional representationalist epistemology, which according to Rorty, tries to step outside of our various different conversations in order to provide a universal metric, based upon philosophical insight into a quasi-mechanical transaction between mind and world, with which any conversation could in principle be adjudicated. Epistemological behaviourism was an unfortunate label to use, however, given Rorty's need to avoid epistemological and metaphysical commitments, since it left him awkwardly having to deny that he held an epistemological position or was a behaviourist (315), which is probably one of the main reasons he abandoned it immediately after PMN in favour of 'pragmatism' (*Consequences of Pragmatism*, chapter 9). But this was more than simply a matter of presentation, for it is one thing to deny having any philosophical commitments, and another to be free of them.

Williams thinks that Rorty's epistemological behaviourism avoids philosophical commitment because it is simply the 'methodological stance' of examining 'thought and knowledge from a public, third-person standpoint' (xiv). But this cannot be all there is to it, however, since Quine adopted the same standpoint and reached conclusions Rorty rejected (213-30). I would suggest, on the contrary, that epistemological behaviourism is an anti-representationalist position on knowledge, motivated by the arguments of Quine, Sellars and Davidson on contentious issues in the philosophy of mind and language. Against this, it might be argued that Rorty's anti-representationalism does not qualify as an epistemological position for the trivial reason that epistemology is defined as representationalism, but this would not sit very well with Rorty's Quinean rejection of an analytic / synthetic distinction, which in turn does not sit very well with his supposed lack of philosophical commitments. Williams employs the same tactic to defend Rorty's commitment to physicalism, arguing that Rorty was what Huw Price calls a 'subject naturalist', which is not an ontological, but rather a methodological stance, that simply involves taking an 'empirical attitude towards human practices' (xv). It is hard to square this merely methodological interpretation, however, with Rorty's forthright claims about the all-encompassing power of physical description, such as that '[s]ome atoms-and-the-void

account of micro-processes within individual human beings will permit the prediction of every sound or inscription which will ever be uttered' (387); Rorty later came to regret this 'overly fervent physicalism' (*Philosophical Papers*, vol. 3: 47). Williams is certainly right that Rorty's rather odd physicalism, which is prominent in PMN, was not meant as an ontological commitment, for Rorty says that physical descriptions have no privilege among 'the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described' (367). But even this kind of negative claim adopts a metaphysical position on the world, for it claims that the world as it exists in itself is description-independent. Rorty frequently affirmed this commitment by arguing that the relation between vocabularies and the world is causal, rather than representational, which strikes me as exactly the sort of position on the relation between mind and world that somebody without philosophical commitments would not hold.

Contrary to Williams, then, I would suggest that Rorty was up to his neck in philosophical commitments, which he defended tirelessly for decades, and that there is an obvious tension between his social coherentism and metaphilosophy; to avoid this he would have had to either keep his critique of philosophy entirely restricted to historical and sociological observations about philosophy's lack of success and irrelevance to contemporary life, or else simply defend epistemological behaviourism as a regular philosophical position. Luckily, Rorty was not particularly sensitive to this tension, and so was able to write his book.

Williams continues by running through the plot of PMN, during which he improves on the presentation of Rorty's historical story; Williams' account of the transition from Aristotelian hylomorphism to Cartesian representationalism is considerably clearer, for instance. One of main motivations for Rorty's history was to show the contingency of current philosophical problems, and Williams neatly ties this in with current debates when he says, for example, that Chalmers' 'hard' problem of consciousness is simply 'a product of Cartesian ways of talking' (xxii). I agree, but it is notable that Rorty himself conspicuously failed to show that there is any alternative; his tangled, rambling, and at times impenetrable discussion of the 'Antipodeans' was supposed to do this job, but was succinctly undermined by Kenneth Gallagher in his 'Rorty's Antipodeans: An Impossible Illustration?' (*Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 45: 449-455). Gallagher's simple point was that the Antipodeans, an alien race of natural-born physicalists, supposedly unable to understand the mind-body problem, would indeed be able to understand the problem, since they would possess both introspective and perceptual concepts of their brain states. Another purpose of Rorty's history that Williams brings out well, was to show the original motivations for philosophical problems. Williams says of epistemology, for instance, that if 'we subtract its larger ambitions, as many philosophers today are inclined to do, epistemology degenerates into a scholastic enterprise. (Remember the Gettier problem)' (xvii). In Rorty's hands, this point was potent and destructive. For instance, Williams later mentions Rorty's distinction between 'impure' philosophy of language, which tries to solve traditional philosophical problems, and 'pure' philosophy of language, which 'aims at systematizing our notions of meaning, reference, and necessity' (xxvii) without connecting this project to traditional problems. It is of course the former rather than the latter type of philosophy of language that Rorty subjects to a sustained critique, but in light of Williams' point, 'pure' philosophy does not do so well either, and

would seem to emerge as a merely ‘scholastic enterprise’, or in Rorty’s words, ‘a boring academic speciality’ (385).

Skipping to the end of the book now, we are presented with Rorty’s essay ‘The Philosopher as Expert’, which was written when he was aged between 27 and 30 years old. It finds him worrying about the status of philosophy within society, and specifically about whether the general public should become better informed about technical and insular philosophical debates, or whether philosophers should instead abandon these debates in order to do something more accessible and socially important; the problem, as he puts it, is that ‘philosophy is unanimously agreed to be ... crucially important, yet the experts in it talk only to themselves’ (404). Rorty comes to a number of metaphilosophical conclusions which present striking parallels to those he came to in part 3 of PMN; this must explain why it seemed like a good idea to reproduce the essay here. He says that there is a tension between conceptions of philosophy as art, and of philosophy as science; this tension is essential to the subject, and the history of philosophy has been driven by a series of revolutions intended to make it scientific, which were undermined by philosophers who refused to be straight jacketed by particular questions and methods. This sounds very much like his analysis of the history of philosophy in terms of ‘edifying’ and ‘systematic’ philosophy in part 3, which is an analysis that was explicitly Kuhnian; Kuhn’s *The Copernican Revolution* was published in 1957, so Rorty could have been an early reader, I suppose. Rorty also says that what makes someone count as a philosopher is that ‘they are taking part in a single continuing conversation’ (411) by immersing themselves in a particular literary tradition; this was mature Rorty’s considered view, so it is amazing to find it here, before his publishing career had even begun. And a final striking parallel is provided when he writes that ‘no philosophy ever dies’ (409), although they are ‘modified almost (but never entirely) beyond recognition’ (410); this sounds just like what he says on the final page of PMN.

Aside from these anticipations of his later views, however, the main thrust of the piece is a vindication and celebration of philosophy, designed to justify its mysterious practices to the wider public, and so it is consequently worlds away from the position Rorty would eventually defend in PMN. Rorty concludes that philosophy should not change, and neither should society: philosophy is doing what it ought to be doing, and it gets just about the right amount of attention. Philosophy’s contribution to culture is to ‘raise questions about questions’ (406), thereby encouraging innovation, and within a free society, the right amount of this kind of questioning will inevitably go on (419). It takes considerable knowledge and expertise to enter into the dialogue of philosophy, however, and so although philosophy is indeed the ‘queen of the sciences’ (417), she is not a monarch that everyone needs to listen to; the fact that most people have no idea what goes on at the APA is okay after all, then, and suspicions about philosophy are unfounded. This essay will be of great interest to anyone trying to understand Rorty’s intellectual development, and it will certainly help to dispel the resilient myth that Rorty started out as a metaphilosophically unreflective analytic philosopher, and turned to metaphilosophy only when he became disillusioned. However, it has nothing to add to the story he tells in PMN; rather the story he tells in PMN has much to add, and even more to correct, to the initial thoughts on the subject recorded in this abortive effort. This essay did deserve to be printed, in a journal or collection of Rorty’s early works, perhaps, but not here.

Finally, we come to Bromwich's afterword, which is not 'new', as it says on the cover, but rather a reprint, and is moreover not even about PMN, which is mentioned only in passing as 'a book that mattered a great deal to me' (425), despite the fact that the reader is holding that book in his or her hands. Bromwich was Rorty's friend, and the piece mainly consists of personal anecdotes, and Bromwich's opinions about Rorty's later, political ideas. These opinions are sometimes critical: Bromwich thinks that Rorty erred both because of his character traits, and because he possessed 'a mind whose native element was philosophy' (428). Nevertheless, it is an obviously affectionate piece, and some may find it interesting, although why it has been included here is anyone's guess.

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